

More than a target; diversity as a development effectiveness principle



by Joanne Choe

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Fiji Women's Fund grantee, SAN Fiji (Credit: Fiji Women's Fund/DFAT)

Our aid program represents Australia to the world and, as such, it needs to embrace our nation's diversity. Diversity is crucial to achieving the best development outcomes; development is complex and needs a vast array of expertise and experience. Women and men of different ages, cultures, abilities/disabilities, religions, socio-economic status and sexualities will bring a myriad of perspectives, approaches, emotions, ideas and mindsets to development challenges.

Many aid programs have diversity requirements, but more often than not this can become a box ticking exercise. If we treat diversity as a compliance requirement, then diversity joins the queue of other compliance obligations.

More than a target, we need to approach diversity as a cross-cutting development principle, like sustainability or ownership, when designing and planning our work. Through this lens, diversity becomes a path in itself to achieving outcomes.

Each initiative will have its own entry points to introduce greater diversity for higher impact. The key is to analyse this deliberately and commit to addressing it.

Here I propose two concrete ways to seek diversity in aid programs: recruiting technical advisers and selecting local partners.

Recruiting diverse technical advisers

A key delivery modality of the Australian aid program is the provision of technical advisers. Because of this, advisers are an obvious place to start in addressing diversity. We know this can be a struggle. We expect our consultants to be qualified with a certain number of years of experience in the field, and preferably prior experience with the donor. We send them to countries where conditions are not always favourable for families, without necessarily supporting them to do so. We differentiate between international and local advisers and remunerate them

differently. All of this narrows the pool of talent we can draw from.

A more diverse advisory pool would bring a broader array of ideas, approaches and results to our programs and benefit our partners.

An example of a project that has made a concerted effort to address gender disparities in adviser and locally employed staff numbers, levels and pay is the [Solomon Islands Resource Facility](#) (SIRF). SIRF is a flexible facility that recruits and supports up to 70 advisers for the DFAT Post and the Solomon Islands Government. In SIRF we have a gender equity strategy with targets that we report against every six months. Implementing this strategy has resulted in more women advisers and locally-employed women working on SIRF. SIRF has also eliminated the pay gap between locally-engaged men and women. This is a good place to start.

We can further work to level the recruitment playing field by incorporating unconscious bias training as part of the interview process, having gender balanced recruitment panels, and standardising application forms and CV formats to remove indicators of gender on applications.

What more can be done? Here are a few ideas:

- Conduct gender and diversity audits of technical advisers.
- Introduce mandatory requirements for adviser recruitment processes to get better results in terms of diversity.
- Assess the [DFAT Adviser Remuneration Framework](#) (ARF) and other conditions that form barriers to diversity (using years of experience as a key measure, being insufficiently family friendly, etc.).
- Remove the requirement to categorise international or local from the outset: this immediately results in different processes that will class foreigners as international and nationals as local advisers with different (lesser) conditions (non-ARF).
- Assess programs for diversity in adviser and staffing pools and require regular reporting on this.
- Look at alternative models, for example using local facilitators. We could also set localisation timeframes aiming to transition advisory roles from international to local personnel.

Working with diverse partners

How do we select our beneficiaries, target groups or partners on the ground? Supporting diverse groups and broad cross-sections of the societies we are working in is important. Often the circles we tend to operate in, the people or groups we consult, tend to be the usual suspects – the ‘donor darlings’.

There are several barriers to reaching groups other than the usual suspects. The accountability requirements of our aid program (fraud, child protection, due diligence), coupled with a low appetite for risk, makes it challenging to work with less conventional partners. We may also simply lack knowledge of which organisations are out there.

One initiative that has actively worked outside the box is the [Fiji Women's Fund](#) (the Fund). The Fund is designed to reach different women's groups, from large and well established, to small, remote and rural groups, with an emphasis on women who are marginalised – women with disabilities and those facing discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The design thinking for the Fund came from lessons learned from Australian and other donors' previous investment in Fijian civil society that showed how smaller groups were often ineligible to apply for grants because of aid program requirements for NGOs. The Fund is established in a way that it can reach women who are not usually part of a gender equality program.

The Fund has pursued different types of engagement and assistance to suit the circumstances of different groups. This includes multi-year core-funding for larger, more established women's groups and outreach to smaller, more remote groups to provide them with access to training and networking opportunities and exposure to gender equality concepts. The Fund eliminates the requirements for small groups to manage money and provides in-kind support, including provision of training and support for small groups to hold meetings and capacity development. The Fund takes time to listen and understand the perspectives of rural, remote and marginalised women's groups so that it can learn, adapt and be relevant to their needs and realities, including through grant processes and strategies.

We have a choice: we can work with donor darlings knowing that they make life easier because they meet our requirements. The loser in this is development effectiveness, as we risk preaching to the converted, crowding the same beneficiaries that are supported by others, and creating gaps. Or we can change the way we partner. I'm not suggesting this is easy. The challenges in working with more diverse groups are that there will be higher risks, and more time and greater investment needed to lay groundwork, build capacity, test ideas and accept failures. But the payoff is a broader array of beneficiaries and participants and a larger constituency for Australian aid that better addresses the needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Thinking about diversity as a development principle

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A lot can be done to consider diversity in aid programs and many programs are already rich in examples of diversity. Structural changes are needed in some cases to address barriers to diversity in adviser recruitment and remuneration, and to consider different approaches to partnering on the ground.

A good place to start is analysing current strengths, gaps and opportunities, reporting on these, and integrating diversity commitments into new designs, contracts and grant agreements.

Let's not be tokenistic. When we think about diversity and its relevance, we need to think about it as a pathway to development effectiveness. If we do this, then diversity becomes embedded as a development effectiveness principle.

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Link:

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